

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF OKLAHOMA**

LAURA L. HILL,)
)
)
Plaintiff,)
)
)
v.) **Case No. CIV-14-223-SPS**
)
)
CAROLYN W. COLVIN,)
Acting Commissioner of the Social)
Security Administration,)
)
Defendant.)

**OPINION AND ORDER AWARDING
ATTORNEYS' FEES TO THE PLAINTIFF UNDER THE EAJA**

The Plaintiff was the prevailing party in this appeal of the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration's decision denying benefits under the Social Security Act. She seeks attorneys' fees in the amount of \$4,102.00 and costs in the amount of \$400.00, under the Equal Access to Justice Act (the "EAJA"), 28 U.S.C. § 2412. *See* Plaintiff's Application for an Award of Attorneys' Fees Under the Equal Access to Justice Act and Motion for Award of Court Costs [Docket No. 19]. The Commissioner objects to the award of fees and costs and urges the Court to deny the request in its entirety. For the reasons set forth below, the Court concludes that the Plaintiff should be awarded the requested fees and costs under the EAJA as the prevailing party herein.

On appeal to this Court, the Plaintiff argued that the ALJ erred by: (i) failing to properly assess her RFC, (ii) using the Grids as a framework for his decision-making without consulting a vocational expert, and (iii) improperly analyzing her credibility.

This Court agreed with the Plaintiff's first two arguments, and reversed and remanded this case for further proceedings. The Commissioner's response to Plaintiff's motion for fees and under the EAJA asserts that her defense of the ALJ's position was substantially justified because reasonable people could disagree, then argued that the ALJ's opinion did in fact account for the Plaintiff's pain-producing impairments and that the ALJ reasonably relied on the Grids (arguments rejected by this Court). *See* 28 U.S.C. § 2412(d)(1)(A) ("[A] court shall award to a prevailing party . . . fees and other expenses . . . unless the court finds that the position of the United States was substantially justified or that special circumstances make an award unjust."). The Court disagrees. In order to establish substantial justification, the Commissioner must show that there was a reasonable basis for the position she took not only on appeal but also in the administrative proceedings below. *See, e. g., Gutierrez v. Sullivan*, 953 F.2d 579, 585 (10th Cir. 1992) ("We consider the reasonableness of the position the Secretary took both in the administrative proceedings and in the civil action Plaintiff commenced to obtain benefits."), *citing Fulton v. Heckler*, 784 F.2d 348, 349 (10th Cir. 1986). *See also Marquez v. Colvin*, 2014 WL 2050754, at *2 (D. Colo. May 16, 2014) ("For purposes of this litigation, the Commissioner's position is both the position it took in the underlying administrative proceeding and in subsequent litigation defending that position."). The Commissioner's reiteration of arguments already rejected by this Court notwithstanding, the Court notes that it was the ALJ's obligation to provide such a reasonable basis in the first instance, *see, e. g., Clifton v. Chater*, 79 F.3d 1007, 1009 (10th Cir. 1996) ("In the absence of ALJ findings supported by specific weighing of the evidence, we cannot

assess whether relevant evidence adequately supports the ALJ’s conclusion[.]”). *See also Drapeau v. Massanari*, 255 F.3d 1211, 1214 (10th Cir. 2001) (“Although we review the ALJ’s decision for substantial evidence, ‘we are not in a position to draw factual conclusions on behalf of the ALJ.’”), quoting *Prince v. Sullivan*, 933 F.2d 598, 603 (7th Cir. 1991), and it is difficult to see how anything said on appeal in this case could justify the ALJ’s failure to do so. *See Hackett v. Barnhart*, 475 F.3d 1166, 1174 (10th Cir. 2007) (“[W]e hold that EAJA ‘fees generally should be awarded where the government’s underlying action was unreasonable even if the government advanced a reasonable litigation position.’”), quoting *United States v. Marolf*, 277 F.3d 1156, 1159 (9th Cir. 2002).

The Court therefore concludes that the Plaintiff should be awarded attorney’s fees and costs as the prevailing party under the EAJA. *See, e. g., Gibson-Jones v. Apfel*, 995 F. Supp. 825, 826-27 n.3 (N.D. Ill. 1998) (holding that the Commissioner’s position was not substantially justified where the ALJ provided an inadequate basis for denying benefits and adding: “It would be unfair to require Ms. Gibson-Jones to appeal her denial of benefits and then not award her attorney’s fees because the ALJ is given a second chance to support his position.”).

Accordingly, IT IS ORDERED that the Plaintiff’s Application for an Award of Attorneys’ Fees Under the Equal Access to Justice Act and Motion for Award of Court Costs [Docket No. 19] is hereby GRANTED and that the Government is hereby ordered to pay attorney’s fees in the amount of \$4,102.00 and costs in the amount of \$400.00 to the Plaintiff as the Prevailing party herein. IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that if the

Plaintiff's attorney is subsequently awarded any fees pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 406(b)(1), said attorney shall refund the smaller amount of such fees to the Plaintiff pursuant to *Weakley v. Bowen*, 803 F.2d 575, 580 (10th Cir. 1986).

IT IS SO ORDERED this 29th day of December, 2015.



Steven P. Shreder
United States Magistrate Judge
Eastern District of Oklahoma